



Hope Burns Bright For Chinatown Park

Nearly 40 years after Chinatown's only public park was demolished to make way for the Dan Ryan Expressway, the South Side neighborhood is celebrating the creation of a six-acre jewel--Ping Tom Memorial Park. Transformed from an abandoned rail yard owned by the Santa Fe Railroad, the park is part of a 20-acre mixed-use development. The Trust for Public Land has been asked to help expand the new park so it can fully meet the needs of the changing Chinatown community.

The first phase has been landscaped in authentic Chinese tradition. The park features four 20-foot columns etched with dragons, a riverside pagoda, an active playground, and plans for an 11-story bell tower. Chicago architecture critic Lee Bey describes this former brownfield as a now "stunning frame to a picturesque view of downtown." In short time the park has become one of Chinatown's most important resources.

It is a community in transition. Seventy percent of the residents are new immigrants, former residents are returning to the area to settle down and raise families, and old industrial sites in surrounding areas are being converted to lofts and townhouses, drawing in even more residents. With this increasing and changing population, the need for active recreational land has become paramount.

"We're seeing a diverse mix of families using the new park," according to Gene Lee, a long-time community activist. "Residents of Chinatown have been waiting for generations for a park to replace the one that was lost in the 1960s when the Stevenson and Dan Ryan expressways were built. Hope burns brightly with the dedication of the garden portion of the park last year, but everyone agrees that the real promise will be met with the next phase north of 18th Street."

Those hopes include the addition of play fields, a field house, and a swimming pool. The current park is not large enough for such amenities. While the Park District owns another six acres along the river between 16th and 18th streets, its narrow shape is unsuited to these needs. At the request of the Chicago Park District, the Trust for Public Land is helping the City acquire an additional five acres of abandoned railroad land owned by Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad. Leading negotiations to secure the land, TPL has been able to bring the railroad to the bargaining table as well as secure grant funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for the initial environmental assessment work. After a more thorough environmental investigation of the land, TPL hopes to have the property under contract and available to the city by this spring.

For more information about the Trust for Public Land and its brownfields program, please visit www.tpl.org or call (415) 495-4014.